

“The evidence that stabilization programs promote stability in Afghanistan is limited.”

—U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,
Evaluating U.S. Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan,
June 2011

“ . . . there is little empirical evidence that supports the assumption that reconstruction assistance is an effective tool to “win hearts and minds,” and improve security or stabilization in counterinsurgency contexts.”

—Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder,
Winning Hearts and Minds?
January 2012

“If you’re looking at this in terms of counterinsurgency, and trying to partner and plan with the military, the civilians aren’t doing their jobs properly.”

“U.S. Military dismayed by delays in 3 key development projects in Afghanistan,”
The Washington Post,
April, 22, 2011

Stabilization Success in Afghanistan The Challenges Within

BY JOHN ACREE

Triumph-happy critics and armchair quarterbacks are quick to disparage U.S. Government efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Media reporting, recent books, and recurring academic forums often focus on failed efforts and propose unfavorable conclusions about this multifaceted international intervention. Some of the testimony rings true, and that is fair enough, but much that is found in current reviews of the Afghanistan effort goes to print with inconclusive evidence, limited testimony, premature conclusions, and incomplete field data.

Afghanistan is an extremely convoluted environment, and it is certainly true that success is elusive. Using information gained from working and living in Afghanistan during the mid-2010 through 2011 timeframe, this article suggests that several challenges to success are less about mispent resources, weak quality control, poor planning, or bad implementation as many reviewers suggest, but originate rather from interference from the very institutions that originally mandated and touted the effort. It also provides a narration of actual events and exposes five of these challenges: hasty strategic change, disjointed leadership, misunderstood capabilities, sudden resource reductions, and shortened project timelines. The article argues that if decisionmakers allow the programs to proceed as designed and within the parameters of stated counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine instead of posing these difficult challenges, stabilization efforts can play a formidable role in supporting overarching political and military objectives in Afghanistan. It concludes with a summary case study that to date demonstrates favorable and encouraging stabilization results despite those challenges.

In addition, this article intends to provide more fuel to stoke informed debate about U.S. objectives in Afghanistan and whether future stabilization engagements are wise investments. The intention is to provide essential lessons learned should the United States consider future civilian engagement in these high-risk and unstable environments.

The effort in Afghanistan is complex, and complexity requires patience—the key premise of COIN doctrine. There is growing evidence that stabilization programs in Afghanistan at the field

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and tactical levels can and do work. However, without deliberate and careful planning and implementation and a thorough understanding of stabilization timelines by decisionmakers, failure is probable. Indeed, the focus of

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criticism should more appropriately narrow on the sources of these external challenges, the negative effect they wreak on stabilization operations, and on how they hamper program implementation and delay critical results. It is too early to admit defeat in Afghanistan or to decry the broader stabilization effort, but if U.S. institutions do not accord adequate time for stabilization efforts to take root and grow, they will remain jeopardized and undermined by rushed endstates, persistent misconceptions, and untimely shifts in policy, funding, and strategies.¹

Challenge One: Premature Strategic Shifts

In a March 2011 briefing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, then-Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) General David Petraeus made several statements regarding his assessment of the effort and resultant progress in Afghanistan: “The achievements of 2010 and early 2011 have been enabled by a determined effort to get the inputs (civilian and military) right in Afghanistan. . . . Getting the inputs right has enabled our forces, together with Afghan forces, to conduct the comprehensive campaign necessary to achieve our goals in Afghanistan.” He then stated:

With the strong support of the United States and the 47 other troop-contributing countries, ISAF has focused enormous attention and resources over the past two years on building the organizations needed to conduct a comprehensive, civil-military counterinsurgency campaign, on staffing those organizations properly, on developing—in close coordination with our Afghan partners—the requisite concepts and plans, and, above all, on deploying the additional forces, civilians, and funding needed.²

The general’s assertions sounded convincing at the time. The U.S. civilian surge, which consisted of increased financial and human resources, was well under way by late September 2010. Hundreds of civilians were in training or already deployed to District Support Teams, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, or the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Proposed funds from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) 2010 Afghanistan budget, including a 2010 supplemental budget increase and requested funds for 2011, were going through the various budget machinations of congressional notifications, authorizations, and obligations. The amounts under consideration were impressive. The USAID Stabilization Unit managed a project portfolio encompassing distinct civilian-military counterinsurgency programs and whose budget tallied hundreds of millions of dollars. The 2010 stabilization budget totaled more than \$490 million, and the 2011 budget request had swollen to \$720 million.³ The USAID/Afghanistan mission proposed annual and supplemental 2010 budgets were the largest annual budget draft requests by a USAID country program ever—almost \$4 billion.

However, COIN practitioners know well that success involves more than sufficient resources. Time is also required for operation success. The need to respect the COIN tenets of *plan*, *prepare*, and *execute* is critical. When reviewing what some argue was a successful COIN operation during the Vietnam War, it is obvious that to realize positive effects from COIN efforts will require great patience and an uncommon cohesive effort from the civilian and military ranks. As noted in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program was implemented during the Vietnam War in May 1967 and by January 1973, when CORDS formally ceased operations, “pacification had largely uprooted the insurgency from among the South Vietnamese population.”⁴ Though the overall effort in Vietnam did not achieve military success, FM 3-24 gives CORDS much credit for pacifying the insurgency in South Vietnam. It required almost 6 years.

CORDS also benefited from a unified civil-military structure under one leadership chain, with qualified and flexible leadership, a working relationship with the host government, and sufficient resources provided during an adequate timeline. Yet in March 2011, while General Petraeus was thanking the Armed Services Committee for its support toward the COIN effort in Afghanistan, a proposed reduction of civilian inputs was already well under consideration and would soon greatly undercut the “inputs right” and “unified effort” Petraeus thought he had obtained. As he concluded his March testimony, Petraeus noted his concern that “Levels of funding for our State Department and USAID partners will not sufficiently enable them to build on the hard-fought security

achievements of our men and women in uniform.”⁵

In late October 2010, 1 month into fiscal year (FY) 2011 and 5 months before the Petraeus brief, the USAID program office director in Kabul informed the various USAID technical offices, including the Stabilization Unit, that Washington had directed mission management to prepare for significant funding reductions for 2011. This meant that USAID program officers who managed activities currently under implementation and/or planned for implementation must plan for an across-the-board funding cut of at least 65 percent. The stabilization budget plunged from the \$720 million request for 2011 to a request for \$256 million—a reduction of \$464 million in 1 year.

The point here is not to pass judgment on that decision but to reveal the sudden shift in USAID assistance strategy at a crucial point in the U.S. surge effort and detail the abrupt budget reductions as one of the major external challenges to stabilization mentioned in this article. Some Afghanistan observers and foreign aid critics no doubt applauded this decision, particularly as it related to the debate on the effectiveness of large aid budgets and stabilization programs. In their Tuft’s University report “Winning Hearts and Minds?” Andrew Wilder and Paul Fishstein counter the assertion that large aid projects (and budgets) promote security objectives in stabilization and COIN contexts.⁶ The authors argue that “Pressure to spend too much money too quickly is not only wasteful, but undermines both security and development objectives” and that “powerful career and institutional incentives often contribute to quantity being prioritized and rewarded over quality.” These findings undeniably applied in part to the

Afghanistan case: certain Washington-based USAID senior staff, ISAF military commanders, and State Department officials regularly demonstrated their naïve understanding of stabilization and urged implementing partners to spend rapidly and in large amounts. However, the draconian budget reductions of 2011 were not due to trepidations about large budgets, rapid spending, or poor performance. Washington shifted its focus from a robustly funded civilian COIN support operation and a hard-driving stabilization effort to a “transition-centric” approach for different reasons. Concerns inflamed by Washington’s changing political environment, escalating budget

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deficits, growing antiwar populism, upcoming 2010 U.S. national elections, and a war-weary U.S. constituency were arguably among the major factors influencing the funding reductions. Guidance on how to make those cuts strategically and prudently was much less clear.

The strategy to begin planning to transition from stabilization to “something else” was unclear at best and injudicious from a field perspective. Nor was it based on assessments, progress indicators, drivers of instability, or negative impact measurements, and the shift in direction seemed premature. Many parts of Afghanistan were still unstable in the fall of 2010 and prioritized as Key Terrain Districts by ISAF. Military field commanders, especially those in Special Forces conducting COIN operations, strongly supported the deeply resourced civilian participation in the COIN

effort. To make definitive programmatic shifts at this time, before allowing the programs to ramp up to full capacity, did not make sense. Many civilian program staffers implementing stabilization considered the transition mandate irrational based on the criterion of troop and civilian personnel numbers alone. President Barack Obama had announced a 30,000-troop increase less than a year earlier on December 1, 2009, with the majority slated to arrive in the spring and summer of 2010. Increased troop numbers seemed not an indicator of transition, but rather a demonstration that the military surge in support of COIN was finally under way. In addition, USAID continued to hire and deploy civilians to the field; they strove to maintain a 60 percent field-based to 40 percent Kabul-based staff ratio and worked toward establishing a record number of USAID staff in country.⁷ Even when a reduction of troops began in correlation with the much heralded “whole of government” transition, one could argue that civilian support levels should increase compensatorily to help maintain a strong assistance effort and avoid activity gaps.⁸

The rapid shift away from stabilization took more than one group by surprise. The reduction of stabilization programming eventually led to a decline in the critical and hard-won civil-military relationship. Brigade commanders and other battlespace owners often viewed civilian stabilization field officers and programs as essential force multipliers—important supplements to the military toolbox to accomplish the mission of the day. With a 65 percent cut in the stabilization effort, many of these newly arrived civilian field officers would now enter the theater with few or no support programs to contribute to the COIN initiative. With the loss or reduction of these additional tools, many of their

military counterparts suddenly viewed USAID field officers as dead weight. Some disaffected military commanders went so far as to refer to them as a waste of everyone's time.

In effect, USAID began to surge in 2009, attained sufficient resource levels in 2010, and pursued a significant recruitment effort in 2011 that would achieve the objectives outlined by General Petraeus: USAID finally "had its inputs right" to support the COIN strategy of the U.S. military. It had them for approximately 6 months.

Challenge Two: Lack of Unified Effort

As the budget scenario unraveled, it became evident to USAID personnel in Kabul that military commanders and State Department diplomats exhibited a pervasive lack of understanding of institutional constraints on USAID programming, budgeting, and contracting in Afghanistan. Nor did they seem to comprehend what effect these limitations had on the desired civilian response levels in support of COIN requirements. Several incidents surrounding the budget issue demonstrate this unfamiliarity and expose the extraordinary lack of unity among senior leaders in both Washington and Kabul regarding the stabilization effort.

On January 19, 2011 (2 months prior to General Petraeus's March briefing to the Senate Armed Services Committee), the USAID/Afghanistan mission issued an email through its Stabilization Office that informed senior development and field officers in Afghanistan that 2010 and 2011 funding for Afghanistan was delayed until the State Department provided certain guarantees regarding funding integrity. The email urged everyone "to be careful" and stated that "We will have to slow down on programming temporarily [to avoid the total depletion of existing funds] while we wait for

the budget to come in to avoid depleting all the funds. Please do consult at local levels with your provincial and district managers so you are unified in your approaches with your local stakeholders, task forces, and [regional] platforms during this temporary slowdown."

On January 25, 2011, the USAID/Afghanistan mission prepared an action memo that informed the State Department's director of U.S. Foreign Assistance of the funding issue and requested approval of an early release of funds for Afghanistan to relieve shortages anticipated by the Stabilization Office. This memo underwent a daunting clearance process that required 26 signatures and it informed senior officials at USAID/Afghanistan, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, USAID/Washington, and State Department/Washington of the funding situation.

Action memo notwithstanding, by March 2, 2011, 13 days before Petraeus's briefing to the Senate Armed Services Committee, the lifeline funding for new or extended stabilization programs remained frozen. At a regularly scheduled video-teleconference briefing among the five regional Senior Civilian Representatives,⁹ three U.S. Ambassadors, and other senior leaders in Kabul, the Stabilization Unit addressed the following agenda item: "Stabilization Program Operations—Washington Centric: Status of Mission Request for Early Release of FY 2011 Funding Budget and Procurement Impact." On cue, the USAID Stabilization Unit provided the teleconference participants with a brief presentation and explanation based on the following summary of the budget issue:

Given current projected burn rate estimates, USAID's stabilization programs have enough funding to carry programs through late May and June [2011]. Once USAID/

Afghanistan receives the requested funding contained in the FY 2010 Supplemental, the FY 2011 “early release” tranche, and the full FY 2011 funds, our stabilization portfolio will be fully financed through the end of calendar year 2012. The Mission has directed all program managers and implementing partners to continue the implementation of existing programs and grants. The Mission is also exercising prudent oversight of stabilization projects.

In other words, USAID had the programs and plans in place, but the disjointed funding requirements that the State Department and Congress requested had hamstrung the agency. The discussion following the Stabilization Unit’s presentation did not proceed amicably, particularly from the southern region’s perspective. Kandahar Province in the South constituted the key battlespace for military and civilian stabilization efforts; military commanders there had made it clear that USAID’s stabilization programs were critical force multipliers to their COIN efforts in the region. Although the other regions accepted the stabilization information brief without much comment, Regional Command–South (RC-S) was not satisfied. The Senior Development Officer in Kandahar rightfully raised concerns that continued delays in stabilization program funding would result in a “catastrophic failure” for the civilian and military effort there. The concern was not new; several conversations between the Senior Development Officer and the Stabilization Unit in Kabul occurred prior to the video call and USAID had taken the issue to Washington. To everyone’s frustration, the issue remained unresolved.

Hearing of this looming crisis, two Ambassadors present at the teleconference

in Kabul became incensed. Apparently, this was the first time they were made aware of this funding delay—a delay caused by the same State Department that employed them—and the dire consequences predicted by RC-S. Perhaps they had erroneously thought that the State Department had provided Congress with the required information, which it had not, or that Congress had already disbursed the 2010 supplemental funds, also untrue. Either way, after a heated exchange among the participants, the two officials concluded that this was USAID’s blunder. One Ambassador insisted that USAID should have requested resources from a special State Department fund to supplement the programs under discussion to prevent any program delays.¹⁰ USAID reiterated that it had adequate resources and would not close any programs. (The issue was the Washington delay, not funding.) The Ambassadors insisted that USAID provide them with more information; this information had already been given to them and their offices via the January 19 email and January 25 action memo from the Stabilization Unit.

In a briefing memo released later that evening for the Ambassadors’ perusal, USAID again explained the funding situation, the status of its stabilization programs, and the actions taken to resolve the issue. In addition, USAID included an attachment that explained that funds appropriated for Afghanistan in the FY 2010 Supplemental Appropriations Act were currently undisbursed pending a report by the Secretary of State to Congress and stated that funds for Afghanistan:

may be obligated only if the Secretary of State reports to the Committees on Appropriations that prior to the disbursement of funds, representatives of the Afghan national, provincial or local

government, local communities and civil society organizations, as appropriate, will be consulted and participate in the design of programs, projects, and activities, and following such disbursement will participate in implementation and oversight, and progress will be measured against specific benchmarks.¹¹

The apparent lack of understanding by senior civilians of the U.S. Government budget process and the sudden realization of the negative effect the disbursement delays have on USAID programs is remarkable. When one considers the various misunderstandings and misgivings exhibited by senior officials during this brief exchange, one can begin to understand the seriousness of the challenge posed by the lack of unity and solidarity needed for civilian support to COIN.

Six days after the combative video-teleconference, the Senior Civilian Representative from RC-S reiterated its concerns in a memo sent to Kabul and declared that the commander general in the South believed that USAID was not fully supporting the military.¹² The frustration was understandable, but the focus of the frustration and the blame were misdirected. As of December 2010, USAID had disbursed \$82.9 million of stabilization program funds in support of the South's COIN effort and had plans to disburse an additional \$32.6 million once funds became available—an exceptional amount for one region and significantly more than originally budgeted. Rather than blaming USAID, one might have argued for a more results-oriented approach in joining the USAID effort back in January to pressure Washington to release the funds.

In addition to misunderstanding the root cause of the problem, the RC-S platform

displayed an erroneous understanding about USAID's stabilization intent. The memo stressed the importance of the USAID-implemented "cash-for-work" programs that "provide a viable alternative to fighting-age males who otherwise may be enticed to support insurgent activities for lack of other economic opportunity." This assumption might have some merit, but no evidence supports the claim, nor was it the program's objective. USAID designed stabilization

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programming, including income generation programs, to link citizens with legitimate state structures and create conditions for extending governance and service delivery improvements—the link being the objective, not the number of employed men. The military's concern was about the total number of employed men as its indicator of success; consequently, RC-S predicted "catastrophic failure" should income generation programs decelerate and unemployment figures rise.

A second key factor exposing a lack of unity was the gap in a whole-of-government approach to USAID participation in stabilization planning and the decisionmaking processes. USAID/Afghanistan provided instructions to stabilization field staff and implementing partners in January to consider possible program contingencies in preparation for future funding delays, understanding that State Department bureaucrats and Members of Congress require time to finalize the requisite

legal and regulatory actions to disburse funds. Why this warning did not translate into contingency plans or contribute to USAID's pleas to Washington for early funding release is unclear. Secretary Hillary Clinton stated in May 2010 at the Brookings Institution, "One of our goals coming into the administration was . . . to begin to make the case that defense, diplomacy and development were not separate entities, either in substance or process, but that indeed they had to be viewed as part of an integrated whole and that the whole of government then had to be enlisted in their pursuit." The RC-S military leaders complained in March that USAID was "letting down" the military effort in the South when in fact USAID was doing all it could to get additional funding.

This example of communication breakdown was not exceptional. State Department and military officials demonstrated poor understanding of the U.S. Government budget process and USAID contracting mechanisms regularly. The fact that two State Department Ambassadors claiming to control U.S. foreign assistance efforts in Afghanistan were either misinformed or uninformed of the department's congressional funding requirements in Afghanistan is no less stunning than the U.S. military claiming that USAID was closing programs or letting them down in March when they were made well aware in January of the congressional/State Department funding delays. In addition, the Ambassador's suggestion that USAID could "borrow" funds from the State Department, or, as suggested in the March 8 RC-S memo, that USAID should "borrow" funds from other USAID programs, indicated a lack of clarity regarding civilian funding regulations and statutory contract authorities.¹³ USAID stabilization programs took pride in the

flexible nature of their activities; they adjusted and responded more rapidly to parameter shifts than most USAID development programs. Their adaptability was limited, however, because U.S. Government legal authorities still governed contract and grant mechanisms. It was not a "cash and carry" system; strict budget management, control, and approval processes regulated the flow and expenditures of taxpayer dollars. To manage funds outside the regulations would be illegal.

When one considers this knowledge gap among senior civilian and military leaders about the programs they claimed to control, should one be surprised that reviewers continue to publish reports and studies critical of the U.S. effort? Although military and State Department officials often repeated the importance of the unity of command concept and emphasized Secretary Clinton's whole-of-government model in frequent PowerPoint presentations, its application was far from perfect and leaning rapidly toward dysfunction.

Challenge Three: Loss of Ownership

As stated earlier, Wilder and Fishstein argue in the Tuft's report that spending too much too quickly can be counterproductive.¹⁴ The argument was borne out through various reporting priorities of several stabilization activities in 2010–2011, but not by design or intention from USAID program officers. The military and State Department exerted strong pressure on USAID to push forward lockstep with military actions and to adjust rapidly to shifts in battlespace priorities. This pressure forced USAID implementers to often forgo essential needs assessments and skip proper monitoring and evaluation exercises in the interest of time and to maintain high project "burn rates" as indicators of success.¹⁵

Nonmilitary actors constitute a key component of successful COIN operations *if* decisionmakers allow civilian professionals to participate fully and equally in the implementation process from the early planning stages to the closeout of field actions. Many examples from the USAID Stabilization Unit's project portfolio demonstrate this value despite some misconstructions and faulty visions set forth by leadership. However, a broad reality check reveals a more lucid understanding of a civilian's limitations as it evolved in Afghanistan during the surge and can help explain why civilian efforts were sometimes not able to perform fully in concert with military actions.

The Reality of Security. Project implementers in Afghanistan face a lengthy and varied list of challenges, not the least of which is security. The insecure and fluid kinetic environment certainly impedes government civilian personnel from doing their jobs, but so do U.S. Embassy security restrictions.¹⁶ In the field, government civilians depended mostly on military assets and force protection for security within the perimeters of life support compounds and during project site visit movements. Understandably, military transport assets often bumped, delayed, or canceled civilian air and land movements to clear manifests for military priorities and randomized field program planning and monitoring. In addition, military commanders often used criteria differently from the Embassy to measure the level of security in any given area. Battlespace commanders frequently complained about the lack of USAID programs and civilian staff in areas deemed secure by their troops, but not supported by the more comprehensive assessment required by U.S. Embassy security.

But how far should the security bubble extend? It would be inappropriate to criticize the State Department's security office for doing a difficult job—keeping Chief of Mission personnel alive—particularly since they do that job well. Nevertheless, the restrictions placed on personnel movement, even within and near the compound grounds of the U.S. Embassy, were stifling. This dilemma—how to maximize personal security but at the same time allow

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development professionals to do their job in support of COIN operations—remains unresolved. It also constitutes a repeated finding in program audits that unfairly criticize USAID for its lack of field monitoring and project site reviews in Afghanistan. Wilder and Fishstein correctly recommend that aid money “should only be committed when it can be spent in an effective and accountable manner.”¹⁷ This implies that project funding levels and timelines need to be synched with implementation capabilities, including a thorough understanding of civilian access, movement, security restrictions, and expectations regarding physical presence.

The Reality of Civilian Readiness. As the 2010 military campaign trundled into 2011, the demand for civilian presence and resources expanded at a rate beyond the State Department's capability to supply them. Despite raised voices from Kabul, the personnel systems at USAID and the State Department in Washington could not produce new arrivals

in the numbers or with the appropriate experience levels to match the military's advances. As ISAF regularly increased the number of approved District Support Teams, Key Terrain Districts, District Development Programs, Village Stabilization Platforms (VSPs), and numerous other priority areas for action, the demand for civilian staff to fill in behind kinetic operations increased exponentially and outstripped supply. In addition, many civilians arriving in country had no prior experience with USAID programs and contracts, conflict environments, or civil-military relationships. To compound matters, inexperienced civilians often deployed to critical field positions without adequate time for training and preparation. Over time and in some areas, military personnel lost confidence in civilian support as a reliable force multiplier because the civilian resources consistently came up short.

The Reality of Contracts and Time. The military's urgency to gain ground and expand operations was constant and usually exceeded the civilian capacity to respond or shift geographically. Civilian contractors and implementers could not deftly shift project activities or move rapidly from one priority area to

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another because of time-consuming approvals or contract amendments. With the exception of humanitarian assistance activities and, to some degree, some stabilization grant activities, USAID implementation structures cannot respond adequately to the demands of a kinetic environment. This is a common and mostly

unresolved civil-military issue, as military commanders often know little about USAID's contract models and the time and effort required to issue new contract awards, amend contracts, increase contract activities, or expand activities into new areas not part of an original battle plan or original contract agreement.

USAID programs could support COIN operations as a force multiplier much more effectively by enacting fundamental changes to its business model. This would require a significant shift in State Department and USAID organizational structure and culture—a shift away from its current hierarchical, plodding, and procedure-focused restrictions to a results-focused, independent, and fleet-footed mentality. It would require State Department leadership to consistently seek ways to disentangle the cumbersome complexities of organizational functioning and to empower its people to cooperate and collaborate with, not just criticize, USAID efforts. Without such changes in its organizational approach including changes in security regulations, staffing capabilities, and contract models, USAID will continue to lack the ability to meet demands; therefore, it should not create expectations of arm-in-arm force multipliers in such fluid and kinetic environments.

Challenge Four: Resources Reductions

The international development community often debates the validity of nation-building and the size and cost of foreign assistance programs in general. The argument that stabilization efforts are too expensive compared to return on investment is prevalent and has some merit. When one examines the factors that influence the allocation of aid resources and considers the vacillation of political infighting, however, the most compelling

argument against stabilization programs might shift from their cost to their impracticality. The formidable and complex external political challenges associated with carrying out stabilization actions make it difficult to achieve a desired effect.

One such factor is the misinterpretation of budget numbers. As stated earlier, the Stabilization Unit in Kabul managed a number of stabilization projects throughout Afghanistan. The Community Development Program (CDP), Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative, and Stabilization in Key Areas (SIKA) program are examples of multiyear projects that had total estimated costs of more than a billion dollars, so at first glance one could conclude that the portfolio is very large. The reality, however, is that any program analysis, large or small, that operates in a complex

environment must take into account funding factors other than just dollar amounts. Unfortunately, the first question inevitably posed by most military leaders, senior civilian leaders, congressional delegations, and media professionals is “How much money?” The question is understandable, but it reflects inadequate attention to the other requirements of operating USAID programs in a complex environment. The simplistic (and erroneous) assumption is that big dollars equal big programs that equal big success (or big failure).

Consider the Funding Source. Some aspects of the Federal funding mechanism, without delving deeply into the convolutions of U.S. budget processes, illustrate why a numbers-based review can lead to distorted assessments of aid effectiveness. First, the underlying Federal funding approval



John Acree

Afghan villagers discuss local needs with development officials

structures are inadequate to accommodate the scope, scale, and pace of the budgetary considerations required to conduct successful counterinsurgency support operations. At the beginning of FY 2011, budget disputes delayed disbursements for Federal Government funding, including funds supporting USAID programs in Afghanistan. Though not a rare occurrence in recent history, the budget delays debilitated program implementation severely in a place that many officials still consider the highest foreign policy priority for the United States. Eventually, Congress passed a series of eight “continuing resolutions” in 2011 that significantly limited USAID’s ability to conduct operations efficiently or to plan rationally.

Subsequently, there was the additional disbursement delay of the 2010 supplemental funds—the very delay that led RC-S to predict catastrophic failure in Kandahar. Without these funds, USAID had to reduce program activity and postpone program startups at a time when the military surge was under way and demands for civilian programs were increasing. No

underlying Federal funding approval structures are inadequate to accommodate the scope, scale, and pace of counterinsurgency support operations

funds, no implementation. No implementation, no results. It is difficult to measure the impact of a well-funded program (on paper) while a dysfunctional fund disbursement process regularly underfunds the program.

USAID correctly distinguishes stabilization programs from classic development programs. This is due in part to the nature of the desired short-term COIN effects. Nevertheless,

even with this distinction, stabilization programs still follow and are subject to definitive U.S. funding and contract management processes. As stated earlier, the Stabilization Unit programs were multiyear contracts and therefore depended on the annual budget process to succeed. Additionally, the programs were not fully obligated. This point is crucial but rarely noted in reports about the Afghanistan effort and the impact—or lack thereof—of COIN and stabilization activities. For example, any critique from 2009, 2010, 2011, or 2012 regarding the CDP, Afghanistan Stabilization Initiative, or SIKA projects would be incorrect if it stated that USAID has little evidence to demonstrate any significant positive impact of its stabilization programs despite its investment of more than \$1 billion. The funds listed on USAID funding documents might exhibit a budgeted total of the sum, but that certainly does not represent the true (smaller) amount USAID has authorized, obligated, approved, or programmed to date.

Typically, a USAID program has inherent and well-practiced design, procurement, implementation, and closeout phases within the lifespan of the program, with each phase requiring from several months to several years to complete. The same is true with stabilization programming, only within a compressed implementation continuum. One other difference is that short-term stabilization impact gains are expected much sooner than with development programs. As a result, each phase of the stabilization process becomes more susceptible to the fickleness of budgetary and political realities, especially if results from a compressed timeline have not yet met expectations. This, in turn, can delay or interrupt a program’s implementation and decrease its responsiveness, flexibility, and overall impact

on beneficiary populations. In 2009, USAID considered stabilization a fundamental goal of its efforts in Afghanistan and submitted requisite funding appeals. In 2010, some of the funding arrived, with additional supplemental funding requested. In 2011, USAID ordered budgets slashed by more than 65 percent, and, to worsen a bad situation, the disbursement of the FY 2011 funding did not occur until the end of that year. By the time Congress and the State Department completed their budget wrangling and General Petraeus declared that he had the “inputs right” to move forward, Washington declared stabilization over. The new phase: transition.

Challenge Five: Compressed Timelines and Benchmarks

To assess program effectiveness and impact, one must also consider the significant negative impacts caused by external players who forced disruption of program timelines and short-circuited the stabilization process. USAID was not allowed the opportunity to develop fully its own strategy, project timelines, objectives, and frameworks. Rather, USAID contributed comments to, and then followed the tenets of, an interagency document entitled “The United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan [ICMCP].” Originally drafted in 2009, the revised plan drafted in February 2011 declared that the U.S. Government was entering “the era of Transition,” and that to realize that goal, “we must enable our Afghan colleagues to move front and center, and then follow their lead.”

In some respects, the document did provide a unified strategic intent, which was commendable. But in referring back to the “inputs right” testimony of General Petraeus a month

later in March and his aforementioned statement that “ISAF has focused enormous attention and resources over the past two years on building the organizations needed to conduct a comprehensive, civil-military counter-insurgency campaign,” it becomes difficult to deconflict Petraeus’s meaning regarding the new February “transition” edition of the campaign plan. A word search conducted on the February version of the 50-page ICMCP provides zero results for the term *COIN*, yet General Petraeus was a cosigner of the ICMCP along with U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry.

The contradiction between the Petraeus testimony regarding the COIN campaign and the new “transition” campaign plan created confusion between the civilian and military ranks. By their design, stabilization activities in support of COIN do not prioritize capacity-building or sustainability. Washington senior leadership seemingly forgot this fact and joined bellowing critics from the media, Congress, and State Department decrying the stabilization programs’ lack of capacity-building and sustainability as a weakness of USAID’s efforts needing correction. To their credit, some Stabilization Unit implementing

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partners did employ implementation models that included some capacity and governance strengthening components where appropriate, but field officers and military commanders rarely requested or expected capacity-building or sustainability efforts as a part of classic stabilization activities. The infighting among

Washington officials, their rush to begin “transition and end stabilization,” and the field staff’s counter desire to finish the stabilization efforts under way unfolded as a classical Greek tragedy, with stabilization playing the lead victim of circumstance.

In April 2011, RC-S representatives traveled to Kabul to participate in a planning conference at the Embassy. As stated earlier, 1 month before the April conference, RC-S issued a memo to USAID stating that the RC-S commanding general expressed his concern that USAID was stopping stabilization employment programs at a critical juncture in the war. Though misinformed about program stoppages, the general’s implications of the importance of stabilization activities in his area of operations were clear. Now his representatives from Kandahar were in Kabul to reiterate his priorities. As the RC-S representative began his presentation entitled “Region Stabilization Approach: Supporting Civilian Stabilization Resources Spring and Summer 2011,” the Assistant Chief of Mission abruptly interrupted the presenter, thanked him for his hard work, and summarily stopped the discussion regarding the RC-S stabilization plan. The Ambassador then stated to the audience that stabilization was finished and that we were now working toward transition. After the conference, the RC-S presenter expressed his astonishment at this news, adding that his commander refused to recognize or even utter the term *transition*.

This incident reflects not only the aforementioned lack of unified effort, but also the imprudent haste of senior civilian leadership to declare stabilization over in Afghanistan and veer sharply into a transition phase that most field personnel agreed was a mistake. What transition meant in terms of operations was unclear; what it meant in terms of timing was

now. The pressure to transition came from the top, seemingly driven by the troop drawdown deadline of 2014 announced by the administration. The Embassy’s instructions were clear. Approximately 7 months after USAID expanded operations and assigned personnel into the rapidly escalating list of Key Terrain Districts, District Support Teams, and other military operation sites, stabilization programming was on the chopping block, and transition was in full swing, whatever that meant.

Overcoming the Challenges: Can It Work?

Despite the challenges impeding stabilization programs in Afghanistan, some activities have met expectations and achieved their intended stabilization results through their fundamental application of coordinated planning, cooperative relationships, unified programming, and appropriate timelines. An example of one such effort was USAID’s participation in the Village Stability Operations (VSO) conducted by elements of the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan and Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Afghanistan. The Stabilization Unit encouraged and supported engagement with special operations forces (SOF), and the resulting support given to the VSO program throughout Afghanistan is a commendable confirmation that collaborative stabilization operations can work effectively. The following example illustrates how civil-military teams can implement COIN efforts successfully if they follow COIN doctrine, plan early, understand each other, and work together.

The Kunduz/Baghlan (K/B) corridor is located in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz. Before 2009, security was relatively

permissive in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces, although skirmishes were common between and among warlords, tribes, and communities. By 2009, a downturn in security resulted in the region becoming more kinetic and problematic. One driver of instability central to this rise in insurgent violence is partially attributable to the designation and recognition of the K/B corridor as a critical and alternative North Atlantic Treaty Organization supply line.

Beginning in late 2010, USAID, ISAF (including SOF Operational Detachment–Alpha [ODA]) teams, and the government of Afghanistan designed and implemented a stabilization strategy to support COIN efforts in this corridor. Based on the COIN continuum phases of “clear, hold, and build,” and through an established assessment process, USAID identified a set of interventions that supported the Afghan government and aimed at systematically addressing the underlying causes of instability and grievances of villagers living within the corridor. By January 2011, USAID—with support from Afghan Community Development Councils (CDCs) and District Development Assemblies (DDAs), USAID implementing partners, and ISAF—outlined the key areas for stabilization interventions for startup once clearing operations terminated, resulting in the formation of a “stabilization corridor” designated within the K/B corridor. In February 2011, USAID sponsored a joint workshop with the Afghan CDC and DDA cluster chiefs in Kunduz City. The workshop represented a milestone in communication and coordination, as it was the first time in several years that the district and village representatives had a chance to work together due to increased security.

USAID uses a standard approach to implementing stabilization activities. As security improves, field personnel move from more

permissive to less permissive communities, thereby creating a safety zone where implementing partners can work with the Afghan government and the CDCs in relative safety. This bottom-up approach interlocked closely with the VSO methodology to support and promote socioeconomic development and good governance. By working with the ODA teams and within the ODA VSPs, USAID could more effectively provide grants, achieve higher efficiency, and maximize program impacts.

In addition to determining the perimeter of the clearing operation areas in both provinces, USAID worked closely with the Village Stability Coordination Centers (VSCC) in Kunduz and Baghlan, and together with the ODA teams determined the area of influence of each VSP. All VSPs in Kunduz and Baghlan were located and mapped within the stabilization corridor, and by April 2011, USAID Kunduz, VSCC Kunduz, and Special Forces ODA developed a strategic and operational plan for USAID activities in VSPs.

To operationalize the new strategy, USAID funded two community-based stabilization projects: the Community Based Stabilization Grant (CBSG) program and Community Development Program mentioned earlier. CBSG was a 2-year project implemented through three Afghan nongovernmental organizations that worked with the CDCs, DDAs, and other organizations. Conversely, CDP employed a direct implementation model whereby implementers worked with community citizens rather than through the CDCs and DDAs. Through VSO, USAID also determined the parameters of cooperation between USAID implementing partners and the ODA teams, and jointly developed an implementation plan for the VSPs in Kunduz municipality and Baghlan Province. The VSPs in both provinces

were located within the stabilization corridor. Through January 2012, USAID implemented 47 projects with the ODA teams—20 in Kunduz and 27 in Baghlan.

The program in northern Afghanistan will now begin its own transition to something new. USAID will implement the SIKA project and build on progress made in the same areas that were important under CBSG and CDP and, it is hoped, bridge the gap from stabilization to development. The difference will be that the Afghan government, through a regional ministry presence, will take a more active role in identifying community grievances and addressing sources of instability and, in turn, fulfilling the promise of stabilization through good governance. The civil-military relationship will also change. Prior to 2010, civil-military coordination in the North was minimal and USAID reacted to the shaping and holding events of

to stabilization programming remain. Tough questions require answers. Will SIKA receive adequate and timely annual resources to finish the work and complete the stabilization process? Will security restrictions allow for activity access, civilian movements, proper activity management, and impact assessments? Will new or rushed transition strategies allow time for SIKA to solidify gains? Will troop replacements and reductions affect the working environment and allow longer term development to replace stabilization in the build phase of COIN?

From a broad perspective, this article asserts that the external challenges of rapid strategic change, disjointed leadership, misunderstood capabilities, drastic resource cutbacks, and unrealistic timelines adversely affected stabilization programming in Afghanistan during the critical 2010–2011 timeframe. When analyzing the effort, reviewers must consider the crippling impact that these factors had on program implementation; to ignore them while searching for impact data and conducting activity reviews would do a great disservice to the dedicated civilian and military professionals who are performing difficult and dangerous jobs. The intent of this article is to inform, not criticize. It aims to illustrate how the power of civilian stabilization operations can significantly enhance COIN efforts if those in control recognize and attenuate certain critical factors and threats to implementation. The international community, including the U.S. Government, would be wise to address these challenges to stabilization operations and tactics as they develop future foreign policy strategies.

As the future of Afghanistan unfolds, reviews, audits, and evaluations of assistance programming must be robust, thorough, and technically sound. Recognizing this, the

the government will take a more active role in addressing sources of instability and fulfilling the promise of stabilization through good governance

the COIN continuum rather than participating in the process. Today, USAID officers in the North can integrate fully into the VSCC structures in both provinces and are currently visiting the existing, transitioning, and new VSPs.

Conclusion: It Takes Time

Kunduz demonstrates that with time, planning, and strong relationships, civilians can implement COIN-focused stabilization activities in Afghanistan. Yet even in Kunduz, one still restrains optimism, as it is too early to claim success or measure impact. The next 2 years are critical in the North, and the threats

USAID/Afghanistan mission committed sizable resources to conduct the Measuring Impact of Stabilization Initiatives project, which began in May 2012. Implemented through a third-party contractor, its mission is to collect, synthesize, and analyze data at the district, provincial, and regional levels to track high-order stabilization trends, and to help inform USAID and Afghan government future stabilization practices in preparation for transition to a classical development environment. One can hope that it will include a thoughtful consideration of the impact of external challenges on stabilization operations, such as those presented here, and help provide a blueprint of an enhanced, informed, and synchronous approach to future stabilization efforts. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ For the purpose of this article and in the Afghan context, civilian stabilization programming in support of counterinsurgency is distinct from development programming. The overall stabilization objective is to create conditions that promote sustainable links between communities and legitimate government structures in order to foster stability and establish conditions for medium- and long-term development. Stabilization is the precursor to development; its objective is to provide the platform to allow appropriate long-term roles for state service delivery—and development—to occur.

² Statement of General David H. Petraeus, commander, U.S. Forces in Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, March 15, 2011.

³ Figures originate from internal United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Afghanistan budget exercise documents and are not final. Funds identified for the Stabilization Unit's programs were mostly Economic Support Funds, just one of many funding sources available for Afghanistan foreign assistance.

⁴ Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, December 2006), 2-12, 2-13.

⁵ Petraeus, March 15, 2011.

⁶ Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, "Winning Hearts and Minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan," Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, January 2012.

⁷ USAID's goal at the time was to reach a total of 387 staff in country, making the Afghanistan Mission the largest in the world.

⁸ Initial phased troop reductions were scheduled to begin in July 2012 and accelerate through the remainder of the year.

⁹ For Afghanistan operations in 2011, the country has five regional commands (RCs): RC-South, RC-North, RC-East, RC-West, and RC-Southwest.

¹⁰ Subsequent inquiries into the existence of a special State Department account proved the suggestion unfounded.

¹¹ Public law 111-32, 2009 Supplemental Appropriations for Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Pandemic Flu, SEC. 1004 (a). The terms and conditions of sections 1102(a), (b)(1), (c), and (d) of Public Law 111-32 shall apply to funds appropriated in this chapter that are available for assistance for Afghanistan.

¹² To quote the memorandum, "RC-South Commanding General . . . believes that USAID is letting 10th Mountain Division down at one of the most critical junctures in the war effort. His field commanders report that USAID funded cash-for-work programs are stopping and large numbers of young men will soon be left without employment."

¹³ Although some USAID funds are fungible, the procedure is not easily completed or rapid and often requires congressional notification. In addition, most USAID programs were waiting on the supplemental funding. Borrowing funds from other existing programs distresses the lender program and causes harm elsewhere.

¹⁴ Fishstein and Wilder, 69.

¹⁵ In Afghanistan, the term *burn rate* referred to a measurement of dollars spent during a specific time, usually monthly. Many considered a higher burn rate better than a lower burn rate and often mistakenly prioritized a high burn rate as a measurement of successful project implementation.

¹⁶ As opposed to "contractor" civilians who were less restricted on freedom of movement and access issues.

¹⁷ Fishstein and Wilder, 69.